

# 'THESE PARISIANS, STORMING HEAVEN': MARX & THE PARIS COMMUNE



*Jason Dawsey*



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One hundred and fifty years ago, the working people of Paris undertook an astonishing and short-lived socialist experiment: the Paris Commune. For seventy-two days, the commune exemplified what Karl Marx termed ‘the Republic of Labour’. Mere days after this experiment was drowned in blood in late May 1871 by the butchers Thiers and Gallifet, Marx proffered his address, ‘The Civil War in France’, the last of a series given to the International Workingmen’s Association, explaining and defending the importance of the commune. ‘The Civil War in France’ has lost none of its importance for Marxist thought and politics. Together with his correspondence from 1870–71, two earlier addresses to the International, and his commemorative statement from 1872, this text is more salient than ever.<sup>1</sup> If the ongoing and accelerating ‘rediscovery’ of Marx and Marxism, especially among radicalised youth, depends only on the *Grundrisse* and the first volume of *Capital* (a trend indicated in much recent Marxology), the results will prove debilitating for any reconstituted Marxist left worthy of the name. The revolutionary historical and political writings of Marx and Engels cannot be quietly omitted or marginalized, and have much to contribute to a renewal of the critique of capitalist society.

Arguably, ‘The Civil War in France’ is second only to *The Communist Manifesto* among these writings. Completing his major biographical study of Marx on the eve of the German Revolution of 1918–19, Franz Mehring described the work as ‘one of the

most brilliant documents that ever came from his pen and all in all even today the crowning contribution to the literature which has been published on the Commune.’<sup>2</sup> A year earlier, in *State and Revolution*, Vladimir Lenin had already produced a brilliant exposition of Marx’s conception of the dismantling of the ‘parasitic’ state machinery grounded in ‘the most careful analysis’ found in ‘The Civil War in France’.<sup>3</sup> Both of these works, conceived on the cusp of or during the most consequential episode of social revolution in the long history of class subjection, reclaimed Marx’s central contention that the Commune of Paris was the ‘glorious harbinger of a new society.’<sup>4</sup> Why should we, a century later, follow the lead of Lenin and Mehring? There are at least three reasons why.

First, Marx recognized immediately the world-historical significance of the commune. His ‘remarkable gift’, as Friedrich Engels stressed, ‘for grasping clearly the character, the import, and the necessary consequences of great historical events, at a time when these events are still in process before our eyes, or have only just taken place’, could not be more evident.<sup>5</sup> For proof, we could simply cite Marx’s missive to Kugelmann from April 12 1871, written four weeks after the start of the uprising against Thiers. There Marx, in one his most evocative turns of phrase, lauded ‘these Parisians, storming heaven’ and contrasted their defiance to the servility he saw in newly unified Germany. ‘What elasticity, what historical initiative, what a capacity for sacrifice’, he elaborated to Kugelmann. ‘History has no like example of a like greatness.’<sup>6</sup>

Marx’s defense at the level of theory for this effusive praise claims considerable space in ‘The Civil War in France’. While the calls for a ‘social republic’ in February 1848 remained largely vague, the commune was ‘the positive form of that republic’, one that not only superseded the ‘monarchical form of class rule, but class rule itself.’<sup>7</sup> Poised against the bourgeois republic headquartered in Versailles, the commune’s ‘true secret’, asserted Marx, was that it was the ‘Republic of Labour’, ‘essentially a working-class government, the produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour.’<sup>8</sup> He insisted that

‘this was the first revolution in which the working class was openly acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative.’<sup>9</sup> Carrying over the language of *Capital*, Marx emphasized to readers that the Paris Commune ‘intended to abolish that class property which makes the labour of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators.’<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Commune represented for Marx a fulfillment and transcendence (in the sense of an *Aufhebung*) of the hopes and aims of the Revolutions of 1848–49. What he discerned in its travails was the concrete realization of the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which had gestated in his thinking since the early 1850s. Socialist workers’ movements would hence orient themselves to the lessons drawn from the heroic but failed struggle waged by the Communards, even as the center of gravity in the battle for socialism in Europe shifted eastward.

That Marx, Lenin, or any other Marxist could speak of an actual proletarian dictatorship in the fleeting existence of the commune owed everything to the radicalism, ingenuity, boldness, and, ultimately the sacrifices of Paris’s labouring population. This dialectic of theory and practice in ‘The Civil War in France’ cannot be overlooked. In a range of areas (e.g. limitations on capital’s control over labour, rent and debt payments, municipal elections, education, gender equality, church-state relations, defense), the municipal government of Paris implemented revolutionary changes justly celebrated to the present. Symbolic actions, like the tearing down of what Marx dubbed ‘that colossal symbol of martial glory, the Vendôme Column’, must not be forgotten either.<sup>11</sup> Those ‘special measures could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people.’<sup>12</sup> Marx touted how ‘plain working men for the first time dared to infringe upon the governmental privilege of their “natural superiors”, and, under circumstances of unexampled difficulty, performed their work modestly, conscientiously, and efficiently.’<sup>13</sup> Despite his use of the gendered language of ‘plain working men’, he did not neglect the ‘women of Paris’, who ‘joyfully give up their lives at the barricades and on the place of execution.’<sup>14</sup> A magnificent example of working-class leadership, the commune also earned the respect of ‘the great bulk of the Paris middle class—

shopkeepers, tradesmen, merchants—the wealthy capitalist alone excepted.’<sup>15</sup> Marx highlighted the plans for ameliorating the socioeconomic and educational situation of the peasantry, plans foreclosed by the bloodletting unleashed by the Versailles regime. His recognition of the commune as ‘the true representative of all the healthy elements of French and therefore the truly national government’ cannot be severed from his simultaneous acknowledgement that his own supporters were a distinct minority among the Communards. The fierce admiration Marx exhibited for what Blanquists, Proudhonists, and neo-Jacobins—notwithstanding his incisive criticisms of them—achieved in those seventy-two days reaffirmed his standing as one of the most democratic and anti-dogmatic intellectuals of any stripe in modern history.

Finally, what might be called the ‘estrangement effect’ produced by careful reading of Marx’s ‘The Civil War in France’ and related texts cannot be accented enough. By this I mean the confrontation with Marx’s optimism and confidence in the mission of the proletariat to overcome the dominance of capital and inaugurate general human emancipation. An encounter with Marx’s writings can seem alienating, particularly in light of the impact of catastrophist and extinctionist currents on the contemporary far left. One example should suffice. On the first anniversary of the Paris Commune, Marx declared to the International that March 18 1871 witnessed the ‘dawn of the great social revolution which will forever free the human race.’ He then proclaimed that ‘the incapacity and the crimes of the middle classes, extended all over Europe, have doomed old society no matter under what form of government—Monarchical or Republican.’<sup>16</sup> The massacre of the Communards had not crushed Marx’s convictions. Rather, he discerned in the commune’s ‘great secret’ a determinate future for proletarian socialism. Such revolutionary optimism survived in the lives of Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and a generation of Marxists who strove to ensure that this momentous instance of ‘working-class government’ was no aberration. In ‘soviet power’, in the revolutions of 1905 and the 1917–23 period, the breakthrough of the commune would secure sturdier foundations.



Marx's interpretation of the heaven-storming militancy, creativity, and commitment of the Paris Commune reaches across the generations. It reminds us of what the self-organization of the masses can accomplish, even under the most beleaguered circumstances.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, I utilize Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin, *The Civil War in France: The Paris Commune*, 2nd ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1988). This volume includes all of Marx's addresses to the First International, a few pieces of his trenchant correspondence with Dr. Ludwig Kugelmann, and Friedrich Engels's 1891 introduction to *The Civil War in France*, as well as some of Lenin's invaluable articles on the Commune.

<sup>2</sup> Franz Mehring, F. (1962) *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), p.450.

<sup>3</sup> V.I. Lenin, V.I. ('932) *State and Revolution*, (New York: International Publishers, 1932), p.36.

<sup>4</sup> Marx, *The Civil War in France*, p.81.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Engels, 'Introduction', in *ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> These quotations are found in Marx to Kugelmann, April 12, 1871, in *ibid.*, p.86.

<sup>7</sup> Marx, *The Civil War in France*, pp.56-57.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.60, 62.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.61.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.65.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, K. and Friedrich Engels, F. (1971) *Writings on the Paris Commune*, edited by ed. Hal Draper, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 225-226.

